*O Lord, who hast mercy upon all,*

*take away from me my sins,*

*and mercifully kindle in me*

*the fire of thy Holy Spirit.*

*Take away from me the heart of stone,*

*and give me a heart of flesh,*

*a heart to love and adore Thee,*

*a heart to delight in Thee,*

*to follow and enjoy Thee, for Christ's sake.*

*In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

After the absolute blast that was our evening together on Shrove Tuesday, many of us came together on Ash Wednesday to begin the Lenten Season. One of the coolest parts of that service as a priest, besides the hundreds of attempts at making the perfect ashen cross of course, is the brief part after the sermon where I am honored to call the parish to a Holy Lent. Every year we are reminded of how the season developed in the history of the Church: as a way to prepare people for their Holy Baptism on Easter, to prepare them for the Holy life of a disciple of Jesus. We also remember that it was a time for those who were baptized, but had fallen away from their calling, to be prepared for reconciliation with the community of the Church and with her Lord. Preparation for Baptism and the recovery of the Penitent were (are now) meant to be both a means of sacramental grace for the individuals involved, but also meant to bring the whole congregation into the heart of the Christian proclamation: the pardon and absolution of Christ's Gospel; the new creation now possible through his life, death, ascension, and resurrection.

But even as I enjoy the Call to a Holy Lent's brief history lesson, I deeply appreciate that it sets forth for us a pattern of living out the memory of faith: both in our own self-examination and in the refreshing of our relationship with the things of God, especially the Scriptures. Therefore, part of what Lent is meant to do is to engage our collective memory of the things God has done in the distant past, to help us be mindful of that which God has done for us in our personal lives, and therefore to rely on Him more even more profoundly as we go.

Like so many aspects of our lives as the People of God, we inherit the habit of continually remembering what God has done from Israel. I suspect that's why the lectionary assigns us to read from the twenty-sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy. Now, Deuteronomy doesn't get the kind of play that other parts of the Old Testament do, mostly because, to many readers, it seems like a boring redux of material that Moses covered elsewhere in the Torah. But Deuteronomy does contain one of the most important texts of the entire Old Testament, especially for the daily prayers of Israel. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 reads: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." This text (with others) was meant to be recited daily as part of pious Jewish observance and was meant to be an ever-present reminder to the Covenant faithful of their unique relationship with a unique God.

The rest of the book takes this fascinating place in the story of Israel too. Recall that after the Exodus from Egypt, Israel made some bad decisions around Mt. Sinai that took the shape of a Golden Calf. This was a very bad thing to do and would show a recurrent pattern of Israel's disobedience to God's commands. Later in Numbers, Israel would show a similar level of disobedience when they believed in false reports about the land they had been commanded to take for their inheritance. Because Israel disbelieved God and went with the false reports of the scouts that were sent ahead, they were left to the exile of wandering for 40 years in the desert. As Deuteronomy opened, the Israelites were about to go into the promised land. The text that follows is kind of like Moses' farewell address to a new generation of Israelites. The previous generation had proven...troublesome and had a hard time with the whole listening to God aspect of the Covenant they had made. But Moses gave them that prayer I mentioned before to help the younger folks remember their relationship to their redeemer. Then he repeated the law of the Covenant for them so that they would obey God and be His light to the rest of the people around them. At the end of a ton of Biblical law is where we found ourselves in today's reading, and in some ways today's text is the culmination of what Moses told the congregation throughout the rest of his address.

Today's lesson from Deuteronomy, like all Sunday lessons, is worth coming back to a few times this coming week. When you do, you'll notice that Moses assumed that the people would, when they got to the land of promise, would set up a place to worship the Lord by making the appointed sacrifices and offerings. Moses even gave some direction as to how the process should work with the priests and such. But what really grabs me about his directions is that the first response of the Covenanted people is not to say a word of praise, is not to invoke the Divine name over the offering, but to recite the memory of the people. Their wandering Aramean ancestor grew to a mighty people while stuck in Egypt and the God that first spoke to the apparent nobody from Ur was the God they cried to when Egypt became a place of their torment. By that God's mighty hand were they saved, and by that God's mighty hand would they prosper, but only if they would remember that the Lord is One and that they should love the Lord with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength.

You might notice now, that when we come together for our worship, for our own offering of the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, that we also remember the mighty acts of God wrought for us in Jesus Christ. Just like Moses wanted for his new crop of Israelites at the cusp of the promised land, Jesus would have us continually listen to the story and obey his law of love. In some sense, all Christian life takes on this sort of heavy emphasis on community memory, but our habits in Lent are meant to reinforce this pattern such that we would, as a body, better represent God to the nations and to one another. I think sometimes we might think of Lent as an individual journey, as we examine our own consciences and try to find which flavor of Oreo, we'll miss most for the next forty or so days. But our lesson from Deuteronomy, and our call to a Holy Lent from Ash Wednesday reminds us that the Lenten pilgrimage is made together. And should the Lenten disciplines have the result of some godly transformation, we trust that each heart so moved would be done so to the glory of God and for the life of the world.

So, like I told those of you gathered on Ash Wednesday, it's an honor to serve you on that Lenten path and I look forward to being among you as we seek to remember God's mighty work and to allow that same work to move in us as His people.

Indeed, to God be all glory. From Age to Age. Amen.